Quality instruction can only begin when students feel safe in their classrooms. This sense of safety needs to extend to all students and all dimensions of diversity. For members of the LGBTQ community, creating safe spaces in schools is a national imperative. According to recent figures, 71.3 percent of our nation’s youth reported hearing homophobic slurs throughout their educational experiences.

In 2011, 38.3 percent of LGBTQ youth were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the previous year because of their sexual orientation and 27.1 percent because of their gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011). High school youth who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual are three times more likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers (Macgillivray, 2000). Nearly half of transgender youth have seriously considered suicide; and, sadly, one-fourth actually attempted to do so (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007). While the nation as a whole is on a trajectory of more accepting attitudes toward persons who identify as LGBTQ, there are still far too many young adolescents who feel fearful, hopeless, and rejected. In essence, they feel unsafe.

The statistics reveal an alarming story. We have an epidemic of hatred in our schools, and classrooms must be transformed into spaces where tolerance and acceptance is taught. We believe literature can be carefully integrated into classrooms and combined with discussions to break apart stereotypes and prejudices; this can help LBGTQ youth feel safer within their classroom environments. In this article, we provide a pathway for teachers to do the important work of creating safe zones for LGBTQ youth. Through literature, effective literacy strategy instruction, and community building, teachers can provide quality instruction that addresses the experiences of LGBTQ youth while promoting tolerance. When done respectfully, we believe this instruction can help lessen the isolation and fear LBGTQ students feel at school. In doing this work, we believe classrooms can transform into safe zones, rather than war zones, for LGBTQ youth.

What Are Safe Zones?

Safe zones are spaces where students feel free to be themselves without fear of reproach or disdain from peers (Henkin, 2011; Ratts et al., 2013). Every classroom should be a safe zone for students, and the best way to promote this positive climate is for teachers to begin the school year by declaring their classrooms “safe spaces.” This means banning hurtful criticisms and promoting positive aspects of their peers’ character—providing affirming statements, showing kindness, displaying consideration, and engaging in meaningful collaboration. Organizations such as the National Education Association provide posters qualifying classrooms as safe zones (http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/Bully_Free_LGBTQ_Poster_Final_A.pdf) that can be displayed in prominent places in the classroom.

A safe classroom is only safe if it is housed within a safe school environment; schools also...
need to commit to providing a zero tolerance policy on prejudice of any kind (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Weiler, 2003). In school environments where the school community adopts a supportive vision, LGBTQ youth have the safety and security they need to thrive. With this said, it is important to note that teachers should be sufficiently trained to create safe zones so that they are fully prepared to meet the challenges that arise from enacting such a space. Some of these challenges include being prepared to respond if they are the first person to whom a student comes out or being ready to thoughtfully engage in conversations with parents or family members who object to the development of a safe zone—citing opposition to the personal religious beliefs of the family (note: for more to address this specific issue, see http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/lgbt-rights). It is important that teachers are fully prepared to engage in effective practices to address the current climate of LGBTQ youth.

Promoting Conversations about Compassion through Literature

Positioning the study of literature on gender identity is critical to exploring issues relevant to LGBTQ youth (Clark and Blackburn, 2009). In this article, we demonstrate how teachers can create safe zones by using literacy strategies in combination with LGBTQ literature to promote conversation, address stereotypes, and create a safe zone of kindness and acceptance within classrooms. We show this by looking into the quality instruction facilitated by Ms. Smith, a middle school language arts/social studies teacher. First, we describe how Ms. Smith uses an extended reaction guide (using both narrative and informational texts) as a means of eliciting student thinking and discussion. Then, we illustrate how she uses a linking chart to extend a thematic study of books on the topic of social justice to applications within and outside the classroom.

It is important to note that we believe issues of identity and culture should not be a one-day, once-a-year, one-book event. We recommend integrating LGBTQ literature across topics and subject areas throughout the year, having students respond to the literature in varied and engaging ways and, especially important, providing opportunities for students to self-select their reading.

A Look in the Classroom

Ms. Smith teaches an eighth-grade language arts and social studies block. She attended professional development workshops on the topic of diverse learners and learned that LGBTQ literature should be used across the school year in association with a variety of topics, not just as a

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK

In this lesson plan, the traditional autobiography writing project is given a twist as students write alphabiographies—recording an event, person, object, or feeling associated with each letter of the alphabet. Students are introduced to the idea of the alphabiography through passages from James Howe’s *Totally Joe*. Students then work with the teacher to create guidelines for writing their own alphabiographies. Students create an entry for each letter of the alphabet, writing about an important event from their lives. After the entry for each letter, students sum up the stories and vignettes by recording the life lessons they learned from the events. Since this type of autobiography breaks out of chronological order, students can choose what has been important in their lives. And since the writing pieces are short, even reluctant writers are eager to write!

single book read in isolation (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Consequently, she is using literature as the basis for her thematic unit “Social Justice: Conversations about Compassion.” In order to broaden the conversations to extend to multiple issues of diversity, she consulted various guides (Popova, 2015) and incorporated literature on varied social issues and used books such as Mr. Lincoln’s Way by Patricia Polacco (2001) about an African American teacher who helps a young boy overcome the prejudice he encountered in his school and Through My Eyes (Bridges, 1999), the account of Ruby Bridges, who experienced prejudice during the time of school integration. Incorporated within this unit on social justice were The Misfits by James Howe (2001), the story of four very different students who feel ostracized in their school and band together to change their environment and the sequel Totally Joe (Howe, 2005), which focuses on Joe, a gay boy who has a crush on Colin, an athlete. Colin shares his affection for Joe but eventually ends the relationship because of his fear of going public with his identity. Ms. Smith chose the books by Howe because of their emphasis on the hurtful effects of name calling and social rejection, an area of concern for teachers and administrators in her school. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of how she used these four books in combination with two strategies for promoting conversations about diversity.

Encouraging Conversations with the Extended Reaction Guide

When Ms. Smith started the year with her unit on social justice, she wanted a powerful, interactive way to get students talking about the topic. She decided to use an extended reaction guide to frame the unit, using it in the before reading stage and after the unit was completed (see Figure 1). The extended reaction guide was originally described by Duffelmeyer, Baum, & Merkely in 1987 as an extended anticipation guide and modified by subsequent authors in later publications (e.g., Wood, Lapp, Flood, & Taylor, 2008; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995). The extended reaction guide is a time-tested strategy consisting of a list of statements (rather than questions) that are designed to elicit students’ thinking on a topic before they begin reading. Because of the influence of prior knowledge on our understanding, asking students to discuss their ideas and images ahead of time is a powerful way to engage them in learning.

Ms. Smith developed statements that broadly reflected the themes of the novels her students would read and designed them to be general enough to elicit thinking, experiences, and prior knowledge. She modeled how to use personal experiences to address the concepts reflected in the statements and reminded students they had to discuss and explain why they agreed or disagreed with each statement. To illustrate the depth of
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EXTENDED REACTION GUIDE

Social Justice: Conversations about Compassion

Directions: Take turns reading aloud each of the statements with your partner to start the conversation before we begin this unit on social justice. Tell why you agree or disagree with each statement and then place a check mark in the appropriate column. Tell about your own experiences, what you have seen, heard or read about it, how you interpret the wording, etc. You and your partner do not have to agree, but you do need to discuss why you came up with your responses. Refer to these statements as we read the selections in this unit and use them to guide your reading. You may choose to make notes in your journal about your thinking. After we complete the readings, we will return to these statements and discuss them in light of the books we have read.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before Reading</th>
<th>After Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>1. Everybody has secrets that are hard to share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>2. There are times when everyone feels left out or different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>3. Coming out is difficult anytime, but especially in middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>4. Everyone feels safe when they are at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>5. Name-calling can destroy lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>6. Being who you really are isn’t a choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>7. Being honest is always the best policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>8. Once you learn to be prejudiced, you can never change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Extended reaction guide for thematic unit on social justice: Conversations about compassion

response she was seeking, Ms. Smith thought aloud her own responses to Statement #5 from the guide (see Figure 2 for extended reaction guide):

Statement #5: Name-calling can destroy lives.

Ms. Smith explained,

I agree with the statement. As a young girl from Nepal in an American middle school, I didn’t expect to feel so left out. My parents taught me to have confidence and always boosted my self-esteem, but when classmates called me names, I was hurt and devastated. My grades went down and I lost interest in school. It wasn’t until a school counselor called me in to tell me my teachers noticed a change that I began to feel better about myself. The students who taunted me were spoken to by school counselors and the teachers all made a special effort to treat me with kindness. It didn’t take long for things to change and for my fellow students to accept me. I knew then that I wanted to be a teacher and that I would always be sensitive to all the differences in my classroom.

After discussing this response, she asked students to keep these statements in mind to guide their reading of the four books in the unit. She encouraged them to write in their journals, to record events, make comments, and note observations they viewed as important or reflected the guiding statements in some way.
At the end of the unit, after reading the four books, Ms. Smith displayed the statements again and assigned students to small groups to read and discuss their thinking. They were asked to discuss characters, events, and lessons learned from the four novels as they related to the statements on the guide. The following conversation occurred after students read Statement #2 (There are times when everyone feels left out or different):

**STUDENT A:** This is true for everybody, but Ruby Bridges really felt left out a lot when she was in school because she was the only black student at first.

**STUDENT B:** It must have been so hurtful to watch the riots outside of the school and the parents pulling their young adolescents out and to know it had to do with you. Then it took one person, the teacher Mrs. Henry, to change people’s minds.

**STUDENT C:** Like Joe felt left out and different in his school. He wrote about it in his assignment and said how he just didn’t fit in with the image of being ‘a guy’s guy.’ In the end, he was happier with himself and he had friends, especially Addie, who stood beside him.

**MS. SMITH:** So everyone does feel different at least at times, and that is normal. Remember earlier in the year I told you how I felt when I was in a new school. But we need to understand that our words do hurt and that kindness to one another is the best approach. So, let’s talk about how the people in these stories began to accept themselves and one another and how we can make our classroom environment a safe place to learn and live.

Believing in the power of collaboration and conversation, Ms. Smith allowed students to work in pairs for the written portion as well, all the time “eavesdropping” on their conversations before asking them to share their thinking with the entire class. While Ms. Smith used the extended reaction guide to frame an entire unit of instruction, many times she uses this strategy to frame a few chapters in the social studies text, an online article related to a topic, or a short story in their literature anthology.

### Thematic Study with the Collaborative Literacy Linking Chart

Ms. Smith introduced the collaborative literacy linking chart (Kissel, Hathaway, & Wood, 2010; Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001) shown in Figure 3. She explained the format and headings at the beginning of the unit and then gave each student a copy to guide their thinking, reading, and discussing of events in the stories. Individually, students were asked to jot down events, quotations, or any important ideas along the way. At other times, Ms. Smith grouped them heterogeneously to encourage small-group discussions.

Conversations throughout the group reading focused on ways in which characters in the story did and did not work together or collaborate within their specific situations. For example, in *Mr. Lincoln’s Way*, young Eugene’s racially intolerant father encourages him to avoid people who are different from them. Eugene begins to feel connected to his teacher, Mr. Lincoln, through their mutual interest in finding birds for the school atrium. It was this connection that helped Eugene’s father see the importance of respecting the culture and ethnicity of other individuals.

Similarly, *The Misfits* tells the story of four students who, while different from one another, don’t seem to fit in with the other students in their school. As a result, they are constantly called names by other students and ostracized socially at their school. We are introduced to Bobbie, who is overweight, Addie, who is considered a nerd because of her intelligence, Skeezie, who is viewed as a troublemaker, and Joe, who is effeminate and gay. Their own differences have caused them to bond and work together as they form a political party, “The No Name Party,” to end the name-calling and verbal abuse in their school.
After reading each book in the unit, Ms. Smith directed the attention of the class back to the chart. She asked the students to summarize the themes and relate the content of the “lessons learned” to the classroom, the home, the community, and society as a whole (see the labels across the chart in Figure 3). The italicized portion of the chart in Figure 3 illustrates representative student summary responses for each of the categories. After summarizing, students discussed how these lessons can help them create “safe zones” in their classrooms. They determined that feeling free and comfortable to say what they each need and expect from a classroom in order to feel safe is what helps to create a safe zone. They also determined that being free to discuss differences helps them understand each other’s feelings more thoroughly and helps them to “think before they speak.”

As students consider the themes from the book via the literacy linking chart, they start to have conversations about how these themes link to their own lives. Students connect the challenges of characters to the challenges they face themselves or the challenges they see others facing within their world. A discussion about intol-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title/ Author</th>
<th>Main Characters</th>
<th>How they worked together</th>
<th>How they did not work together</th>
<th>What happened in the end?</th>
<th>Application to Classroom</th>
<th>Application to the Home</th>
<th>Application to the Global Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title: Through My Eyes Author: Ruby Bridges (Articles and Interviews compiled and edited by Margo Lundell)</td>
<td>Ruby Bridges</td>
<td>Ruby found comfort and peace in her classroom, even if she was the only black student. Her teacher’s support, made Ruby’s grade one classroom experience a memorable, successful and great one.</td>
<td>Many people were not happy with integrating schools despite new laws. Parents of white children refused to bring their children to school and the white students that attended were kept away from the black students.</td>
<td>Ruby’s first grade was better because of her wonderful teacher, Mrs. Henry, who didn’t see color. Ruby shares her life story and experiences that occurred during school integration. Ruby went back to the same school to provide opportunities for the students to fulfill their hopes and dreams, as well as enjoy school the same way she did.</td>
<td>A classroom should be a place where all students feel safe and free to learn. Teachers can help by not allowing hatred in the classroom.</td>
<td>Children should be taught at home not to see color and to show compassion for others of all races and cultures.</td>
<td>Everyone should be afforded equal opportunities to thrive and succeed. We have to encourage laws that provide all humans with equal chances to be successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title: Mr. Lincoln’s Way Author: Patricia Polacco</td>
<td>Mr. Lincoln, Eugene (reformed bully)</td>
<td>Mr. Lincoln, an African American principal invited Eugene (white), a student to help attract birds to the school atrium. He helped Eugene understand that everyone should be respected no matter their ethnicity,</td>
<td>Eugene’s father was racially intolerant. He encouraged his son to not mix with persons that were different than he was. Eugene’s behavior was learned from his father.</td>
<td>Mr. Lincoln helped Eugene with his issues of prejudice and showed him the importance of respecting other people’s ethnicities/differences through using what he loved, birds.</td>
<td>There is a reason for bullying and it often starts at home. Teachers should find positive and effective ways to teach students respect, tolerance and caring.</td>
<td>A parent is a child’s first teacher. Parents who are racially insensitive can negatively affect their children in many ways.</td>
<td>Respecting others differences will help to make the world a peaceful and better place. Kindness to others is the only way to make the world better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Linking chart for thematic unit on social justice: Conversations about compassion

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erance in Mr. Lincoln’s Way leads to discussions about how students feel discriminated against based on their own identities. Pondering over and discussing the bullying and abuse characters suffered in The Misfits can help students relate to similar experiences in their own lives. Literature opens the door to a room that serves as an initial safe zone for young adolescents who may now feel more comfortable to talk about serious issues. It has the potential to lead students to discuss their own lives, their own experiences in the world, and, importantly, to understand the experiences of others who differ from them.

Supporting LGBTQ Youth through Literature

The path to enact changes in thinking is through conversation. The purpose of this article is to show some strategies that teachers can use to encourage conversations about the everyday hurts...
and injustices our students encounter and the need for greater compassion for one another. It is important to note that while we are committed in our beliefs about the power of literature to build supportive and safe environments for LGBTQ youth, adding inclusive curricula is just one strategy for the creation of safe and inclusive schools. Leaders in the field, such as Pompei (2012), have created more complete lists of strategies and recommendations to transform climates and cultures and this work can be found in easy-to-access educators’ guides such as those found at the Trevor Project’s website (thetrevorproject.org). These strategies, coupled with related literature, can serve as vehicles for changing thinking and changing attitudes.

Students who identify as LGBTQ need to see themselves in literature they read to know they are not alone. Straight students need to see LGBTQ youth reflected in literature to confront any stereotypes or prejudices they may have of their peers. Meaningful literacy experiences can help facilitate this important connective work. When teachers use literature to acknowledge and confront, they don’t just build a literacy foundation for their students, they create a safe zone for LGBTQ youth and all students in their classrooms.

References

Literature Cited
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